BIOG.

T. R. Ellis

OSLER, THE TEACHER

By W. S. Thayer

[From The Johns Hopkins Hospital Bulletin, Vol. XXX, No. 341, July, 1919]

OSLER, THE TEACHER

By W. S. Thayer

Observe, record, tabulate, communicate. [198]

Use your five senses. The art of the practice of medicine is to be learned only by experience; 'tis not an inheritance; it cannot be revealed. Learn to see, learn to hear, learn to feel, learn to smell, and know that by practice alone can you become expert. Medicine is learned by the bedside and not in the classroom. Let not your conceptions of the manifestations of disease come from words heard in the lecture room or read from the book. See, and then reason and compare and control. But see first. No two eyes see the same thing. No two mirrors give forth the same reflection. Let the word be your slave and not your master.

Live in the ward. Do not waste the hours of daylight in listening to that which you may read by night. But when you have seen, read. And when you can, read the original descriptions of the masters who, with crude methods of study, saw so clearly.

Record that which you have seen; make a note at the time; do not wait. "The flighty purpose never is o'ertook, unless [199] the deed go with it."

Memory plays strange pranks with facts. The rocks and fissures and gullies of the mountain-side melt quickly into the smooth, blue outlines of the distant panorama. Viewed through the perspective of memory, an unrecorded observation, the vital details long since lost, easily changes its countenance and sinks obediently into the frame fashioned by the fancy of the moment.

Always note and record the unusual. Keep and compare your observations. Communicate or publish short notes on anything that is striking or new. Do not waste your time in compilations, but when your observations are sufficient, do

[199] not let them die with you. Study them, tabulate them, seek the points of contact which may reveal the underlying law. Some things can be learned only by statistical comparison. If you have the good fortune to command a large clinic, remember that one of your chief duties is the tabulation and analysis of the carefully recorded experience.

The collection and study of your own observations is much, but he who works in his own small compartment leads, after all, a restricted and circumscribed life. Go out among your fellows, and learn of them. The good observer is not limited to the large hospital. The modest country doctor may furnish you the vital link in your chain, and the simple rural practitioner is often a very wise man.

Respect your colleagues. Know that there is no more high-minded body of men than the medical profession. Do not judge your confrères by the reports of patients, well meaning, perhaps, but often strangely and sadly misrepresenting. Never let your tongue say a slighting word of a colleague. It is not for you to judge. Let not your ear hear the sound of your voice raised in unkind criticism or ridicule or condemnation of a brother physician. If you do, you can never again meet that man face to face. Wait. Try to believe the best. Time will generally show that the words you might have spoken would have been unjust, would have injured a good man, and lost you a friend, and then—silence is a powerful weapon.

When you have made and recorded the unusual or original observation, or when you have accomplished a piece of research in laboratory or ward, do not be satisfied with a verbal communication at a medical society. Publish it. Place it on permanent record as a short, concise note. Such communications are always of value.

Mix with your colleagues; learn to know them. But in your relations with the profession and with the public, in everything that pertains to medicine, consider the virtues of taciturnity. Look out. Speak only when you have something to say. Commit yourself only when you can and must. And when you speak, assert only that of which you know. Beware of words—they are dangerous things. They change color like the chameleon, and they return like a boomerang. Do you

know the story of the young physician, about to enter practice, [199]
who was sent by his father to his old friend, Sir William Stokes, for advice? A pleasant conversation, and, at the doorway, a last word: "Charley, don't say too much." Then, at the gate, a voice: "Charley, come back a minute; I'm very fond of you, my boy; don't *do* too much."

"Don't do too much." Remember how much you do not know. Do not pour strange medicines into your patients. Our greatest assistance is given by simple physical and mental means, and by the careful employment of such drugs as have been adequately studied, with regard to the action of which we have real information. Do not rashly use every new product of which the peripatetic siren sings. Consider what surprising reactions may occur in the laboratory from the careless mixing of unknown substances. Be as considerate of your patient and yourself as you are of the test-tube.

Familiarize yourself with the work of others and never fail to give credit to the precursor. Let every student have full recognition for his work. Never hide the work of others under your own name. Should your assistant make an important observation, let him publish it. Through your students and your disciples will come your greatest honor.

Be prompt at your appointments; that is always possible. Many are always late at a consultation; few miss a train. There is no excuse for tardiness.

Live a simple and a temperate life, that you may give all your powers to your profession. Medicine is a jealous mistress; she will be satisfied with no less.

Save the fleeting minute; do not stop by the way. Learn gracefully to dodge the bore. Strike first and quickly, and before he has recovered from the blow, be gone; 'tis the only way. . . . .

If you can practice consistently all this, ... and then, if you can bring into corridor and ward a light, springing step, a kindly glance, a bright word to every one you meet, arm passed within arm or thrown over the shoulder of the happy student or colleague; a quick, droll, epigrammatic question, observation or appellation that puts the patient at his ease or brings a pleased blush to the face of the nurse; an apprehen-

[199] sion that grasps in a minute the kernel of the situation, and a memory teeming with instances and examples that throw light on the question; an unusual power of succinct statement and picturesque expression, exercised quietly, modestly and wholely without sensation; if you can bring into the lecture room an air of perfect simplicity and directness, and, behind it all, have an every-ready store of the most apt and sometimes surprising interjections that so light up and emphasize that which you are setting forth that no one in the room can forget it; if you can enter the sick-room with a song and an epigram, an air of gaiety, an atmosphere that lifts the invalid instantly out of his ills, that produces in the waiting hypochondriac so pleasing a confusion of thought that the written list of questions and complaints, carefully compiled and treasured for the moment of the visit, is almost invariably forgotten; if the joy of your visit can make half a ward forget the symptoms that it *fancied* were important, until you are gone; if you can truly love your fellow, and, having said evil of no man, be loved by all; if you can select a wife with a heart as big as your own.

[200] whose generous welcome makes your tea-table a Mecca; . . . . if you can do all this, you may begin to be to others the teacher that " the chief " is to us!

An eye whose magic wakes the hidden springs
Of slumbering fancy in the weary mind,
A tongue that dances with the ready word
That like an arrow seeks its chosen goal,
And piercing all the barriers of care,
Opens the way to warming rays of hope.
A presence like the freshening breeze that as
It passes, sweeps the poisoned cloud aside.
An ear that 'mid the discords of the day
Swings to the basic harmonies of life.
A heart whose alchemy transforms the dross
Of dull suspicion to the gold of love.
A spirit like the fragrance of some flower
That lingers round the spot that this has graced,
To tell us that although the rose be plucked
And spread its perfume throughout distant halls,
The vestige of its sweetness quickens still
The conscience of the precinct where it bloomed.